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ABSTRACT

This report lists and discusses guidelines for short-term electives, or mini-courses, for the high school language arts curriculum. There are a few references to other fields besides English and to the interdisciplinary humanities to suggest the adaptability of the guidelines. The guidelines can be used for a variety of types of short term courses, such as "selectives," nongraded courses, cyclical courses, phased courses, triads, mods, and concept mini-courses. Nine advantages of such courses are listed. The author discusses ground rules that appear to be necessary for a school to incorporate such courses and presents detailed suggestions of steps to follow in the process of preparing the new curriculum. The last section of the report is devoted to comments about planning such mini-courses. The author emphasizes that the basic rationale behind these courses should be a shift of the major effort of learning from the teacher to the students. (Author/DI)

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# NONGRADED QUARTER SELECTIVES

## MINI-GUIDELINES FOR MINI-COURSES

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Mini-Guidelines for Mini-Courses

INTRODUCTION

A few years ago nongraded short-term electives, or mini-courses, originated apparently in the English language arts field with the purpose of giving students some flexibility, interest, and self-determination in this vital but endlessly required study. The report of the APEX program in Trenton, Michigan, set off a rapidly spreading rash of copies and adaptations, many of which have been reviewed in national educational journals, especially those from the National Council of Teachers of English.

First reports have been exciting, but, as is so often true of innovations, most of them have been publicized either before the programs have actually begun or before they have had time to prove themselves. Seldom is a program reviewed after it has been working for two or three years, usually because the teachers and administrators involved are too busy with the momentum of it to write it up for publication. These people, however, share valuable information in informal discussion, some of which is incorporated here.

Also, because the plan has developed largely in the language arts field, where it is probably needed most, the examples cited here are drawn primarily from that area. There are a few references to other fields and to the interdisciplinary humanities to suggest the adaptability.

This explanation of the mini-course plan for the secondary school is not to be interpreted as meaning that all learning at all levels should be left to children's decisions or that underlying functional skills are to be left to whim. Nongraded short-term selectives are appropriate when students have developed some learning skills with which to work and are ready to begin thinking about possible directions for their lives.

Neither is this explanation to be interpreted as meaning that the mini-course plan will cure all educational ills. It is just one of the most promising ideas to appear in a long time. Like all other worthwhile human endeavors, however, it must be handled with knowledge and judgment if it is to fulfill its promise.

Since the whole idea of short-term electives offers a heady freshness to the language arts field, some schools adopt the mini-course plan without sufficient information and preparation on the part of the administration, the staff, the students, and the parents. Where this occurs, the program can fail without

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having had a chance to succeed. For this reason the following brief guidelines have been prepared to assist those who are considering incorporating mini-courses.

TERMS

Short-term courses, now being organized in many secondary schools across the nation, are given a number of different names, according to the way they are conceived in each school. They are called nongraded phase electives, nongraded quarter electives or "selectives," mini-courses, short-term electives, phased triads, "mini-mods," and perhaps other titles. Explanations of a few terms may be helpful.

- Short-term courses or mini-courses are organized on a 6, 9, or 12-week basis. Each course is complete in itself and provides credit in proportion to its part of the school year. The time allotment is usually determined by the length of grading period used in the local school. Thus, mini-courses can be offered in one broad subject area, such as language arts, without disturbing the organization of the rest of the school. One-semester courses, which are not considered mini-courses, and noncredit, special-interest courses that meet a few times on a floating or out-of-class time are not discussed here.

- Selectives, often called electives, are courses available for student choice on the basis of course description and statement of purpose, as opposed to students' being "placed" in certain courses or sections by guidance counselors or other school staff. Since, by state regulation, four units of credit are required in the language arts field for high school graduation, the term "selectives" is used here sometimes in preference to "electives," which is applied to subject areas not required. Additional mini-courses taken beyond the required number are truly electives.

- Nongraded describes courses that are open to high school students of two or more consecutive grade levels in any combination, such as 11-12, 10-12, 9-12, 9-10 and 11-12. In this context nongraded means the lack of grade-level designation and does not refer in any way to assigning grades or marks for achievement.

- Cycle, in this context, means the number of school years included in the nongraded mini-course program, usually from two to four years.

- Phased describes courses that are numbered according to difficulty, usually on a 1-5 scale. A course might be designated as a 1, a 2-3, a 2-4, a 5, etc., for the placing of students according to abilities.

- Triads are 12-week courses organized into three terms for a school year. They are appropriate only where the entire school is organized in 12-week terms. This organization is sometimes adopted where the school anticipates the possibility of establishing year-around school by adding a fourth 12-week term in the summer.

- Mods, in this context, may designate the terms in which courses are offered. For example, for 9-week courses there are 4 mods during the year; for 6-week courses, there are 6 mods. A given mini-course might be offered during the first and third mods at different class periods.

- Concept mini-courses are those courses built on such topics as courage, prejudice, or death, each course including everything that relates to its topic. Since such topics are interdisciplinary in scope, they usually necessitate some form of team teaching.

POSSIBILITIES

The selective mini-courses may

(1) provide motivation for students through some degree of self-determination;

(2) permit students to see the purpose, focus, and scope of a course from the beginning so that they know what they are dealing with;

(3) permit a change of class and teacher personality without major scheduling problems;

(4) permit teachers to work in the fields of their greatest competencies;

(5) encourage teachers to give up dependence on a textbook and lecture and plan each course with focus and originality, without waste motion;

(6) provide for students' individual differences and interests in both ability and age, replacing the unsuccessful and stigmatizing ability grouping or tracking and the traditional course-of-study concept;

(7) permit both students and teachers to make a fresh start more than once a year and profit by what they have learned;

(8) permit students to take advanced work in some special interest when they cannot devote a full school year to the subject;

(9) minimize the amount of time lost by a student who is not passing a course if the school adopts the no-fail grading system.

GROUND RULES

Certain ground rules appear to be necessary for a school to change to the new organization smoothly and to permit the plan to fulfill its purpose:

- The school needs a minimum of two language arts teachers for each class period in which mini-courses are scheduled, but that need not be every period during the day. After language arts, other subjects, for which fewer quarters are required, can offer mini-courses with only one teacher in the field.

- The teachers, principal, and guidance counselor or enrollment advisor should begin planning as early as possible during the school year prior to the implementation of the plan. The concept of non-graded mini-electives needs time to develop and the scheduling requires a somewhat different approach. The mini-courses themselves demand of the teachers different arrangement of material and tighter planning than traditional courses.

- As the planning progresses, the other teachers, the board members, the students, and the parents to be involved should be informed of the philosophy and purpose of the mini-courses. Students are greatly interested and often make helpful suggestions as they see the plan develop.

- The teaching staff should work closely with the library-media specialist as courses begin to take shape, for materials will have to be drawn from a number of sources.

- Everyone should understand that mini-courses in one or two subject areas need not disturb the regular scheduling of other courses.

- Probably no teacher should be required to work in this type of program against his will, for much depends on his own initiative.

- Structured learnings, such as beginning skills in a new subject, courses that necessitate continuity of production, such as journalism, and courses that are designated and reimbursed as federal programs, should probably continue in the traditional length pattern. At more advanced levels, when the skills have been learned and requirements fulfilled, some delimited work might be organized into mini-courses.

- Any school staff contemplating initiating nongraded mini-electives should make use of available information about a number of similar programs and profit from what others have learned. Considerable information is available from the English language arts specialist in the State Department of Education.

A PROCESS OF PREPARATION

When there is a genuine interest in implementing a mini-course program, the school staff might include the following steps in the process of preparation:

- Plan with all teachers to be involved several months in advance of implementation. Never implement such a program by administrative edict. Let the teachers and the administrator build the program together with their own enthusiasm and expanding information.

- Compile a list of possible topics, a number somewhat above the number that can actually be offered.

- Explain the proposed plan to students, including the purpose and possibilities as well as the limitations.

- Make clear to students early that though they will have the cycle number of years in which to take, for example, their required 12 quarters in language arts, they will be limited to choices among (or between) the minis offered during any one hour and one mod.

- Submit the list to students for numbering in order of interest, each student keeping in mind the basic requirements for the subject area.

- Using the course topics that received the lower numbers generally but arranging them in different order, submit to students a second list for preference numbering.

- After students have indicated their preferences of course topics to be offered, make up the class schedule for the year first.

- Formulate a blank schedule chart that shows the periods of the day reading across and the numbered mods, e.g., 4 quarters, reading down. At the left make a space for language arts Teacher A, Teacher B, Teacher C, etc., in each mod. Duplicate a number of copies for work sheets. Each teacher's daily schedule reads from left to right in each mod. A student's schedule possibilities read from top to bottom within any given period.

- Using the master schedule for the current school year, if no new one has been prepared, X out the planning period for each mini-course teacher throughout the year. Then, using erasable pencil, tentatively write in course titles from the "most preferred" list of topics. Take into consideration the following:

  - At least 2 offerings for each period each mod.

  - A choice between literature and some other branch of the language arts each period and mod.

- A limit of 3 preparations per day per teacher, if possible. In quite small schools this limit may be impossible.

- A flip-flop of courses so that they may reappear at different periods in later mods. Thus other students will have chances to take them. Teachers will have the opportunity to improve the units the same year and also hold the number of courses taught in one year to 10 or 12 for any given teacher.

- Hold out a number of the preferred topics the first year to provide a fourth to a third new courses the second year and another new group the third year. Plan to offer some new courses in the subject area each year until the cycle has been completed.

- Prepare brief descriptions of the courses likely to be offered the first year and distribute them to students before they preregister. Include in each description the basic content or type of content and major procedures to be used, such as extensive resource reading, close analysis of text, seminar, independent study.

- Have each student register for a language arts period for the entire year, for example, third period. He then may choose among the courses offered third period during each mod, enrolling tentatively at the beginning of the school year for the entire year. If it seems wise, make some readjustments later in the year on an individual basis.

  If the student has an open mod at another hour and wishes to take an additional mini-course, there should be little difficulty enrolling him for it. Later, when the basic organization is functioning rather smoothly, more flexibility in scheduling might be initiated, especially if other subject areas turn to mini-courses.

- Register for any given class period only the number of students that can be handled by the number of teachers available for mini-courses during that period. Schools that have tried scheduling to match preregistration and reregistering students each mod have encountered so much confusion that they have changed to this suggested plan.

- When a class registration is full, close it. Assure students who could not get in that they will have later opportunities to take the course. Without such a limitation, teachers and facilities may not be able to handle the groups.

- Either limit the number of minis a student can take in any one subject area in any one year or require that he take something in each of certain areas each year. Otherwise the school may have to admit that some students can do all the necessary high school work in less than the specified time, and graduate them when they have completed the requirements. An alternative might be to make the courses so valuable that students will elect more than the required number. Avoid permitting students to complete all their requirements in one or two years and have nothing to do but stir up trouble during their senior year.

COURSE PLANNING

Changing the organization of the language arts offerings from full-year courses to mini-courses provides the occasion for changing course planning and method certainly; activities and materials somewhat. Changes must be deeper than just breaking a full-length course into four parts to be taken consecutively, with the teacher continuing to do the studying and talking and the students continuing to "recite," in the literal sense of the word. This is the occasion to shift the major effort of learning onto the learners.

- Wherever possible, mini-courses might profitably be organized as strands, separated the long way of the continuum, so that chronology and relationships can be built into each course, rather than cut across, leaving the material in unrelated fragments. This organization is particularly appropriate for courses in literature, social studies, and others that involve historical continuity.

- In structured or sequential disciplines, minis should be limited to specialized studies beyond the basic requirements; for example, mathematics beyond Algebra I and beginning geometry; home economics beyond the first two years; science beyond the beginning course which provides general terms, concepts, and procedures with which to work. It is important to check with the appropriate state department supervisor or specialist before implementing such a plan, especially for vocational education.

- In less structured fields such as English language arts and social studies, establish minimum basic requirements to be taken any time during the student's mods in the mini-course program. Basic requirements for language arts and social studies, for example, might be stated thus:

  For language arts:

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | quarter(s)=American literature | | 4 | quarter(s)=literature |
| 1 | " =English literature | | 2 | " =composition |
| 1 | " =composition | OR | 1 | " =speech/drama |
| 1 | " =speech/drama | | 1 | " =language study |
| 1 | " =language study | | 4 | " =others |
| 7 | " =other language arts | | | |

  The "other" minis would include other language arts courses and studies in mass media and related arts.

  For social studies:

  4 quarters=American history
  2 quarters=American government
  2 quarters=Other social studies

- The planning for each course might well be built on the following framework:

Rationale: Why should we study it?

Student Objectives: What should the students be able to do with this learning by the end of the study unit -- and later?

Pretest: What do the students already know about the topic?

Appropriate practices: What activities will best lead to the accomplishment of the objectives during the study unit?

Materials and equipment: What resources shall we use? What materials and equipment are available?

Posttest: How far have the students progressed toward the accomplishment of the objectives during the study unit?

Projection: What educated prediction would the students make for the future development of the topic studied?

Unit evaluation: How could this unit be improved?

Each course that is organized as a strand might be built on these three questions: In respect to this topic,

(1) Where are we now?

(2) How did we get here?

(3) Where might we go from here?

Examples of topics for such strand courses are these: social criticism in literature, humor in literature, tragedy in literature, literature of protest, the supernatural in literature, search for meaning, the conquering hero, the suffering hero, the geography of English usage.

For such interdisciplinary topics as courage, prejudice, and death, the minis can be built also on the three questions given above. In response to Question #2, a study might run out to definitions of and attitudes toward the topic now and at different periods of history and in various cultures, along with the effects of such attitudes on the law, tradition, and life style of the people.

It is important that at the beginning of a mini-course the students have an opportunity to contribute their desired outcomes to the objectives prepared by the teacher. Then each student should have a copy of the combined objectives toward which he is to work during the course. He will know when he has accomplished what he set out to do.

Some objectives should, of course, be open-ended to lead students to different degrees of achievement.

- Where mini-courses are organized to serve different purposes and lead students in different directions, employing different major procedures, as stated in the course descriptions, it seems wise to avoid establishing ability levels or even "phasing" the courses according to difficulty. It should be sufficient to indicate that a given course may require much rapid reading, daily writing, informal class discussion, or individual progress at one's own speed. Students will group themselves by interest and need.

  An example of alternative directions for similar subjects might be (1) applied or functional grammar, for those who don't like it; and (2) comparative grammars, for those who like it. Number (1) would deal with the application of traditional, prescriptive, handbook grammar rules. Number (2) would offer a comparison or coexistence of traditional and linguistic grammars as a legitimate academic study of the English language, observing both its surface and its deep structures.

- Certain important learnings or skills are sometimes incorporated into each mini-course instead of or in addition to their being concentrated in a separate course. For example, some schools include written composition as an integral part of every language arts mini-course so that every student will have experience in writing. One school requires of every student a "core" of language arts learnings. Another school limits the nongraded mini-courses to grades 10-12, leaving the 9th grade course a full-year concentration on material traditionally required of everyone.

  In deciding how best to deal with these common skill learnings for the local school, however, it is best to consider these weights that are not all on the same side:

  (1) What reason is there to think that a required "core" of 9 weeks more of composition and prescriptive rules would accomplish what several previous years of study have not been able to accomplish? Would a quiz-out system for the "core" skill be worth considering?

  (2) Would a concentrated 9th grade course be able now to establish learnings, such as verbals, dependent clauses, and parallel construction, that have previously been almost impossible before grade 11? Or do all students need to study them? Or is there a way of teaching only the functional aspects by the end of the 9th grade?

  (3) Wouldn't students feel tricked to find elective courses loaded with the "same old stuff," to the possible exclusion of much that they really wanted to learn? Would it be better to make the courses what the descriptions say they will be and try to accomplish the use of learned skills through incentives?

- Mini-course topics might well be broader than a special interest of a teacher and more defined than a genre of literature. "American Folk Ballads" and "Poetry" are both difficult to organize into a mini-course. "The Supernatural in Literature," however, offers a range in time and genre in which students can search man's continuing interest in what he does not understand.

- In choosing materials for a mini-course, the teacher should select carefully those items to be used for class group study, perhaps with student assistance, and make ample provision in the plans for student collateral study and contribution. Several commercial textbook publishers are producing paperback books of mini-course size and scope. Materials in nonprint media are also helpful.

  In freeing themselves from dependence on a single textbook, however, teachers would be foolish to discard or discount the textbooks themselves. Literature anthologies, for example, especially those that have the full texts of many selections, contain a valuable collection of materials and study activities. Teachers should discard only the limitation and discount the dependence.

- For future reference, it is helpful to keep an accumulating file of one-page briefs for all mini-courses. Include for each course (1) the topic, (2) the reason for offering it, (3) briefly stated objectives in terms of desired student competencies (observable behaviors), (4) major procedures used, (5) materials used, and (6) any constructive suggestions about what did or did not work well.

The importance of making some fundamental changes in thinking and teaching methods for the staffs of most schools, if mini-courses are to live up to their potential, can scarcely be over-emphasized. Changing to nongraded mini-electives provides the occasion to shift part of the responsibility for choices, information, and learning to the students and to give new life to the language arts and perhaps other disciplines for both students and teachers.

## Reader Response

If, from your experience in planning and working with mini-electives, you can offer constructive suggestions for inclusion here, please fill out this page and mail it to Miss Lois Caffyn, Specialist
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I. We wish we had known in advance --

II. Our experience has shown us --

Signed_____

Position_____

School_____

School Address_____

City & State_____ Zip Code_____